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Restoring a legend: Long absent cupola returns to the Presbytere

Renovations scheduled to be completed by October 2005

Most people gaze upon the beautiful panorama of Jackson Square and observe the symmetrical layout of the buildings. The Presbytere and the Cabildo flank St. Louis Cathedral like mirror images. Yet, astute observers will notice one very small difference between the two historic State Museum properties. The Cabildo is topped with a classically designed cupola. The Presbytere is not. This was not always the case and will not be the case for much longer.

The Louisiana State Museum has just kicked off a 10 month restoration project that will not only repair the roof of the Mardi Gras themed museum but will top it off with a cupola identical to the one on the Cabildo. Local firm Yeates & Yeates Architects, L.L.C. has designed the cupola and other renovations and Brice Building Company will handle the construction.

Angèle Davis calls the restoration “essential to the mission of the Louisiana State Museum” saying that “This project presents a unique opportunity for necessary repairs as well as a chance to honor the lost architectural heritage of a magnificent and historic building.”

The Presbytere began construction in 1797 during the Spanish Colonial period but was completed under the Americans in 1813. The building underwent major renovations in the 1840s after the Baroness Pontalba built the famous Pontalba apartments. Both the Presbytere and Cabildo added third floors with mansard roofs and matching cupolas. In 1911, St. Louis Cathedral transferred the Presbytere to the Louisiana State Museum and it remains part of a statewide network of ten museums to this day.

The original Presbytere cupola lasted over 60 years. On September 29, 1915 a category 4 hurricane caused major damage to the New Orleans area, uprooting live oaks, flooding parts of the city and destroying or damaging several landmark structures. The exterior structure of the Presbytere’s cupola was demolished. Due to lack of funds at the time the roof was patched without a cupola and remained so for almost a century.

Oddly enough, another hurricane would step in to return the Presbytere to its previous condition. Due to damage from Hurricane Georges on September 28, 1998 and a recent severe hailstorm the roof of the building was again in need of repair. Facility Planning and Control officials, previous museum director Jim Sefcik, and the architect for the restoration Ames Yeates and his colleagues made the decision to restore the building to the way it was when the State Museum acquired it in 1911.

Yeates noted that while his office was doing field investigation they discovered that “the central heavy timber structural ring that supported the original cupola was still in place in the attic area. The new cupola,” said the architect, “will also be supported from this original heavy timber ring.” Also among their discoveries was the patched indentation in the roof where the original structure had been extended through the roof to the attic.

This project will be made possible due to \$1,974,270.00 in capital outlay funds and insurance settlements from the recent storm damage. The restoration is scheduled for completion in October 2005. During that time the museum will remain open to the public on Tuesdays-Sundays from 9 am-5pm.

For more information on the cupola renovation or the Louisiana State Museum call 504-568-6968 or 800-568-6968 or visit <http://lsm.crt.state.la.us>

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